

Meeting Minutes

Project: Commonwealth Avenue – Phase 3/4

Subject: Community Meeting #1

Date: November 17, 2014, 6:00-8:00 PM

Location: Brighton Marine Health Center, 77 Warren Ave, Boston, MA

Attendees: See attached sign-in sheet

The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the project to all relevant City departments in order to solicit response and guidance moving forward into conceptual and final design. The following issues were discussed and/or decisions reached.

INTRODUCTION AND PRESENTATION

Zach Wassmouth of Boston Public Works introduced the project, the design team, and City staff and elected officials in attendance.

Jerry Friedman of HDR and Deneen Crosby of CSS provided a Power Point presentation pointing out the various aspects of the project. The project will deliver a finished corridor that is Livable, Walkable, Multimodal, Green, and Sustainable. Key presentation highlights were as follows:

Livability

- Provide this portion of Comm. Ave. with a sense of identity.
- Curvilinear alignment provides closed views of edges and architecture. Very different from Beacon Street in this regard.
- Harvard Avenue is a focal point for the project, and can be better than Coolidge Corner, since significantly more space available in right-of-way.
- Key will be managing the scale, which is quite different from Beacon Street, and making it more human-scaled.
- Carriage roads are a unique resource of the corridor, and the extra space they provide could allow for opportunities for special community events, parklets, and urban interventions.

Walkability

- Important to provide ample crossing opportunities. Pedestrians are crossing at points outside of designated crosswalks. Much of the jaywalking appears to be associated with MBTA passengers.
- The project will focus on crossings and providing more safe and accessible opportunities.
- Pedestrian issues for travel along (as opposed to across) the corridor, are occasional narrow sidewalks (especially in commercial areas); and desire to walk along the landscaped median, as evidenced by “goat paths” worn into the lawns.

Multimodal

- The corridor experiences substantial use by all modes of traveling public (motorists, bicyclists, pedestrians, and transit users).
- Key bicycle issue is finding the correct type of facility, and locating this facility within this asymmetrical corridor. Connectivity at each end is critical.
- One early idea was to provide two-way cycle track along the existing landscaped median. Potential issues with this approach including ease of connectivity at each end for westbound cyclists; accommodation of short-trips along the corridor without “wrong-way” riding; and potential use of the cycle track by pedestrians.
- Thoughtful use of the carriage roads may be the key to resolving cyclist issues in the corridor –requires study of multiple alternatives, including treating as shared roadway, etc.
- MBTA coordination opportunities include accessibility across corridor, access to stations, bringing stations into code compliance; signal priority, potential station consolidation. Team has met with MBTA and they are considering practicality of a companion project.
- Vehicular issues include “right-sizing” the roadway for the actual traffic carried, and improving intersection safety for all users.
- Two intersections (Harvard and Allston) have elevated crash rates and will require formal Road Safety Audits.
- Team understands critical concern of providing safe separation between bikes and peds, particularly if side-by-side facilities are implemented, and at intersection “mixing zones”.

Green

- Main goals are street tree preservation and planting; and strengthening weak edges

Sustainability

- Opportunities exist to reduce impervious areas, leading to improved stormwater quality, and reduction of Heat-Island effect.
- Important that any special features be maintainable. City will seek commitments from various departments, as well as key private stakeholders.

Harvard/Comm Ave Intersection Case Study

- Team showed very preliminary concepts for this intersection, for the purpose of demonstrating how all of the five design principals can be brought together into a coherent design. Focus of this intersection will be creating enlarged, multi-functional public spaces; implementing greenery and sustainable features; improving image and access of the MBTA station; calming traffic; creating more urban human-scaled feel.

SCHEDULE

- Data Collection and Concept Development is to be completed by April 2015
- Pre-25% Plans to the City in July 2015 for review and comment by all departments
- 25% Plans to MassDOT in September 2015
- 75% submission May 2016
- 100% Plans September 2016.
- PS&E January 2017.

Stakeholder meetings are anticipated for the following dates:

- A meeting with key advocacy groups will be held November 3rd.
- Community Meeting #1 will be November 17.
- Another community meeting will be held prior to the submission of 25% plans to MassDOT.

DISCUSSION / ATTENDEE COMMENTS

- 1) For the visually impaired, crossing at intersections along Comm Ave is especially challenging. Currently there are no accessible (audible) signals so there was a desire expressed to incorporate aids as part of the improvements, and to also to provide short-term improvements as soon as possible since the main project is at least a few years out in the future.
- 2) The carriage roads are used by delivery and service trucks as well as cars. It is important to maintain the carriage roads, since having trucks stop on the mainline would hinder traffic flow.
- 3) The example of pervious asphalt shown in the presentation was not aesthetically pleasing. The area could definitely use more trees and better landscaping to make it a more inviting and pleasant neighborhood.
- 4) Should avoid creating neck down areas which are a source of accidents and create unintended conflicts.
- 5) More emphasis should be placed on accessibility issues, especially for the visually impaired. Harvard Street intersection currently is tough to negotiate for visually impaired people, but the worst intersections to negotiate in the project area are Packard's Corner and Kelton Street.
- 6) Question if the designers were thinking of reducing parking and adding more trees and landscaped areas? Team responded that other than the MBTA alignment, we will consider the entire cross-section as available for reconsideration.
- 7) If angled parking is to be maintained, consider "back-in" angle parking which is safer for motorists and cyclists.
- 8) Consider having pedestrian phases come up automatically in traffic signal cycle, rather than pedestrian activated.
- 9) Question if the MBTA tracks would be moved to the center of the road to make the road more balanced? Team responded that we have met with MBTA and they no plans to move the tracks.
- 10) In the process of modernization, important to keep the Boulevard feel of Comm Ave. Do not used cheapest materials – keep it classy.
- 11) A concern was raised that Boston College was removing trees as part of their campus construction. It is important that this project maintain the existing beautiful trees.
- 12) Crossing Comm Ave is very difficult, more difficult that it should be and people get hit by passing cars very often. The fence between the MBTA tracks presents a visual and crossing barrier. Would be nice to have a central landscape mall like in the Back Bay section of Comm Ave.
- 13) Team should not be overly reliant on actual bicycle counts. Cyclists avoid Comm Ave in general and go to Beacon Street or Allston Street because of the problems. Lots of latent bicycle demand.
- 14) Is there a thought given into striping the steepest part of Comm Ave for biking facilities? (This refers to the Phase 5 area west of Warren/Kelton Streets)
- 15) Current maintenance of green spaces is poor, in the areas near CVS and from Herb Chambers to Griggs Street. Weeds grow waist high and it remains like that without any proper care. What will be done in future to maintain landscaped areas? Boston Parks and Public Works response has been inadequate.

- 16) Who will be responsible for maintenance of landscaped areas and proposed sustainable elements in future?
- 17) Fixing Comm Ave will regain respect for Allston/Brighton as it's the main thoroughfare in the area.
- 18) Concern that project is moving forward now, after many years of delay, merely to create employment opportunities for engineers/contractors, in which case beautification and landscaping will take a backseat in the process.
- 19) Concern that absentee land owners in the area do not care about the neighborhood and also do not make any efforts for beautification and maintenance of the area. Suggest a neighborhood "Friends" group, or financial assistance from major abutting landowners to help with maintenance.
- 20) Requested that there be no use of crushed stone below the trees (as at Wallingford Avenue) and the city was asked to commit more effort for maintenance.
- 21) Concern that the MBTA will be hard to get onboard with this project and it was suggested to look into planting more trees along the MBTA ROW.
- 22) Consider daylighting Salt Creek/Smelt Brook, a formerly natural waterway now enclosed in a culvert and which reportedly contributes to flooding. Could become a park-like feature as in the Muddy River daylighting project, and other locations internationally.
- 23) There is little green space in this area other than Ringer Park.
- 24) It was mentioned that there were some old A-line tracks still existing in the Packard's Square area (about 75' in length), and it was very difficult for bikes to navigate through the area to cross and turn on to Comm Ave. It was also suggested that the former A-line track stub be removed.
- 25) It was mentioned that during the Phase 5 project (Warren to Lake Street) a problem they faced was coordination with MBTA and the Parks and Recreation Departments. The designers on this project should be aware of this fact moving forward.
- 26) Boston Police Dept: The MBTA jersey barriers visual close up the intersections and reduce the line of sight of drivers leading to a number of accidents. Particularly true at Comm/Allston and Comm/Harvard intersections.
- 27) Boston Police Dept: At the Harvard Street and Comm Ave intersection there are very frequent jams, too many movements occur raising the amount of conflicts. The jersey barriers are also areas for graffiti artists to ruin the aesthetics of the neighborhood.
- 28) BPD suggests the design team make the area more approachable and accessible to families to reduce the crime rates and increase the feeling of safety in the neighborhood. Brighter lighting would help also – need to account for shadows cast by trees and adjust lighting accordingly. Crime prevention is possible through environmental design.
- 29) The recent upgrade to the carriage road done in front of the Herb Chambers dealership is bad for pedestrians and bikers. Question whether sidewalk slope is compliant.
- 30) Question of whether there is a land use agreement between Herb Chambers with the City and who owned the road in front of the business.
- 31) Designers take a good look at lighting and if ornamental lighting/ pendant lighting was an option for this area similar to Phase 5 to the west.
- 32) It was noted that the public in general thought that there is a great potential for beautification and improve the quality of life in the area. There were some concerns about the safety at the intersection of Harvard Street and Linden Street area.
- 33) Project should incorporate opportunities for public art as much as possible.
- 34) Consider low level lighting for pedestrians, not just roadway lighting. Types of benches, poles, lighting that will be added to the area are important and should preserve the historic nature of the neighborhood. Should not be ultra-modern.

- 35) Design should give the area a more natural look and consider adding various species of trees instead of making the landscaping look forced. (Cited uniform row and species of trees near Wallingford in Phase 5 area)
- 36) Concern that construction is not funded which raises uncertainty of this project being constructed.
- 37) It was requested that the MBTA attend the public meetings for this project so that the people are able to get answers directly from the agency about their concerns.
- 38) It was suggested that the design team look into introducing protected bike lanes and protected intersections (www.protectedintersections.com) which provide better sight lines and also include more waiting space for bicycles and pedestrians.
- 39) Concern was raised about loss of parking in the area. It was important that the intersection of Harvard Street, Allston Village area and the commercial district have their current parking options maintained.
- 40) Opinion that much of the push for roadway and parking reduction comes from transient residents and do not represent views of longer-term residents committed to raising families in Allston/Brighton.
- 41) The team was told that the residential parking in the neighborhood was very crucial and that it was mostly not regulated, attracting outsiders to park. City should look converting more unregulated spaces to Resident spaces.
- 42) It was suggested that team look into a more systematic approach to balance commercial and residential parking in the neighborhood. Side streets should be considered when thinking about the total parking supply. Also consider demographics and vehicle ownership, which may be different here than in other parts of City.
- 43) It was requested that the team share traffic data when it is available so that they can get a better sense of why some design alternatives will be chosen over others.